

The Impact of Full Day Kindergarten on Rural Child Care

The Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program implementation will have a differentiated impact across the province, particularly in rural communities, where the instability of child care services may result in rural children and families bearing a heavier burden of change compared to their urban peers. This is particularly true during the early stages of Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten implementation in rural communities, which will require its own brand of strategic leadership, adequate funding resources and a sustainable infrastructure to support an effective program and consistent quality outcomes across the province.

The limited availability of child care in rural communities is complicating quality levels. More often than not, public funding is provided to programs because they *e. i.*, rather than because of their level of quality, effective business management, or good operating practices. There are several communities, some even within a 150 km of radius of central Toronto, where there is only one 16 space licensed child care program serving populations of up to 1500 children from birth to 6 years. Many of the spaces that are available in rural communities are part time or part day only, while in other rural communities, there are no licensed child care spaces at all. Service system managers are noting a growth in commercially operated spaces in rural communities, and see this as an indication of not for profit operators being more risk-averse than commercial operators in the current child care climate.

Spaces for infants and toddlers tend to be in critically short supply in rural communities. A strategic plan specific to rural communities will be necessary in each phase of Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten, to first address a long-time deficiency in spaces for infants and toddlers. Only then can there be any real growth in spaces to meet rural families' child care needs. Rural development research indicates that a lack of full-time child care spaces in rural areas is connected to children's safety, and to poverty, isolation, and unstable economies of rural communities. The combination of extremely low or no availability of licensed child care programs, *and* Low Income Cut Off rates (LICO, both before and after tax) *and* children's Early Development Instrument (EDI) scores among those in some of our rural communities is raising child care service planners' concern. Service system management data show that many rural families are willing to make a twenty kilometer drive for high quality licensed care (more evidence debunking the myth that rural families *prefer* unlicensed care); but that, ultimately, there just aren't enough licensed child care options available for them.

Systems change at this critical juncture must be managed effectively by child care leaders, however there is a limited capacity to address the planning that is needed to transition rural communities. Notable characteristics of rural child care programs increase their vulnerability during times of change and reductions in funding. For example, rural child care programs typically operate at a real ("operating") capacity that is dramatically lower than their licensed capacity. Not only does this mean that actual spaces available through the child care "system" may be slightly overstated, this also means that child care supervisors in rural programs are likely to be spending large portions of their day "on the floor" resulting in their administrative and leadership responsibilities naturally sliding to the back burner, reflecting the larger systemic issues with respect to rural child care programs' limited capacity to develop sustainability plans. Compounding this reality is the shortage of full time positions making rural ECEs' average wages significantly lower than their urban counterparts overall. ECE hourly wages in rural child care programs tend to vary widely: in one community the range is between \$10.40 per hour and \$34.50 per hour (these rates include the added dollars of wage

subsidy) for the same ECE position in two separate rural programs. In order to be effective, Full Day Early Learning implementation must be cognizant of the needs of rural children and families, and invest adequate, timely and strategic resources in ensuring the capacity and supports exist to ensure consistent quality outcomes across the province.

For more information on this topic, as well as about the Atkinson Centre, please visit: www.oise.utoronto.ca/atkinson